

POLITICAL OBSERVATIONS

ON ARUBA

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The Dutch islands in the Caribbean, Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao, Saba, St. Eustatius, and St. Martin (southern part) were until the early 1950's known as The Territory of Curacao. This reflects the central position Curacao played both as the administrative and cultural leader of the island group. Political and economic realities in the past for the most part justified this relationship. Curacao has always had the largest population and in the past maintained the highest economic level because of its plantations and excellent harbors. For most of the duration of the organizational history of the six islands Curacao contributed the largest percentage of revenue needed for the functioning of government services. However, the Netherlands government has directly (by investment and direct contribution to public utilities and services) given a great deal of economic aid to the islands. One Aruban summed up the past historical relationships by stating that "The Dutch act toward the islands like a benevolent uncle while Curacao acts toward the other islands as if Curacao were the father and the other territories just children."

The overall Dutch attitude toward the islands has been extraordinarily liberal. They have slowly moved in an autonomous direction

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politically while remaining bound within the limits of a constitution which can only be changed or amended by the Dutch government in Holland. It has been eighteen years since the last major constitutional political reforms were passed. These did away with the appointed governors and provided for Separate Island Councils and a central Council (Staaten) to take over all governmental functions except foreign policy and defense. Suffrage was expanded to all citizens 23 years of age (now 21), and political parties were formed, opinions on specific issues began to crystalize and meaningful elections to both the local and territorial councils were held. It was against this background that I endeavored to collect information from residents of Aruba concerning their attitudes toward and awareness of the evolving political systems. Aruba has 2 elections to be concerned with--every four years, one for the Island Council (21 seats divided amongst all the political parties) and one for the territorial Staaten (Aruba gets eight seats, Curacao twelve, Bonaire 1, and the Windward islands share one vote for a total of 22 seats) which meets in Curacao. Many Arubans feel that this form of government is not to their best interests because it does not allow Aruba an effective means of solving the economic and social problems it faces today. They claim that more autonomy--from Curacao is the only answer. Extreme shades of opinion concerning Aruban autonomy run from ultra-

nationalism down to passive cynicism, and there are racial issues which polarize the political stand/^{taken}by many people. I began to interview people just in terms of their political awareness and immediately the presence of a recent politico-economic phenomenon on Aruba came to light. For many years --1927 to ca. 1955--the Lago refinery singlehandedly prevented any unemployment problem on Aruba because of the large numbers of workers needed in its operation. In fact Aruba today has a diverse population partly because labor had to be imported to run the refinery. In the last ten years the Lago has automated and now is operated by 1700 people; at its post-war peak it employed over 8000. The official layoff pattern at the beginning (with government sanction) was to first pension off or expatriate the non-Aruban workers and try to keep as many native Arubans as possible. The job squeeze ultimately affected many men among the native population, leaving Aruba with a sizeable unemployment problem. The party in power from 1954 to 1966 was the Aruban Patriot Party (PPA) and these problems fell upon its administration. The more nationalistic Aruban Popular Party (AVP) began to oppose any solutions offered which did not satisfy its viewpoint that native Arubans should receive priority over others in government policy. As competition for jobs became more and more fierce, individuals and groups with power, money, or influence became involved with

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getting available jobs for friends and supporters. The party in power, at this time the PPA--was forced to exert pressure through its members (many of whom were businessmen and government officials) to make job openings for "friends of the party." Many of my informants, workers and government officials alike, cited stories of individuals who suffered loss of jobs or businesses because they were "politically on the wrong side of the fence." Thus was established a new dimension in Arabian politics (aside from the normal participation on varying levels of awareness and interest) which many people responded to by becoming noncommittal in political conversation. One government official told me that this causes a dilemma for many people at election time when a new Council is to be voted on. He said that if you are going to work for the opposition party, not only do you have problems finding numbers of people who will openly commit themselves, but you can be in a precarious political position should the opposition fail. Of course there are numbers of people who openly opposed and worked against the PPA; they are either immune to the system or too idealistic to keep still. Moreover, the opposition leaders in government are in many ways protected by the compromise policies inherent in a two strong party system. It is the small businessmen, lower hierarchy government workers, and the "employee" in general who is susceptible to manipulation for political reasons.

Local Aruban election laws permit 'voting by proxy' in certain cases. A person can sign over his vote to someone else if he has a doctor's note. This affords room for vote-manipulation measures to establish themselves in the electoral process. Indeed, many disgruntled AVP people accused the PPA of using these devious means to retain power in the 1958 and 1962 elections.

On Aruba, because of the small population and specific apportionment rules, individual votes take on an importance that was hard for me to comprehend at first. Some people told me of cases in which people sold their votes directly for money, a maneuver which would prove unwieldy and impractical with a larger population. The AVP however, by forming a coalition government with the three small political parties was able to wrest power from the PPA in the last election. One wise old man who called himself a "political observer" for many years, told me in a not too cynical tone, "The AVP took over partly because of increased support, but partly because they were finally successful in buying or stealing as many votes as the PPA." On the other hand some AVP supporters stated that the party is now working to change some of the voting regulations to prevent corruption and vote-manipulation in the election process.

Current records show that about 90% of eligible voters cast their ballots in every election. The vast majority of people I spoke to seemed to realize and believe that their individual vote is important. This feeling was consistent among people of varying educational and income levels. The people whose political observations were filled with cynicism still responded positively when asked "Do you vote?" The political party and election system which has developed on Aruba in the last two decades has succeeded in arousing an intense degree of commitment, sometimes hazardous, among the people.